Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta

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The purpose of this essay, despite appearances, is to explore concepts. Concepts are implicit in social practices, when people join together to do something, to make something happen. Often, in order to do that, actors must have a common idea about what they are doing, otherwise that common action would not be possible. Though not always verbalised, either in everyday or intellectual forms, these ideas are nevertheless social concepts. Serious conflicts and quotidian happenings happen around them, and they are deployed with a routine repetitiveness when people carry on their everyday interpretation of the world— to describe what they see and evaluate what they approve or deplore. This paper explores some forms of the idea of what is public in the city of Calcutta, particularly through the ways in which people represent and act in space.

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1. By verbalised I mean a case where the concept is clearly expressed verbally by people who are bringing it into action on it, by label/statement. I mean the somewhat different case where there are acts, like books, journals, or other intellectual forms in which such concepts are defined, deployed, continuied. The concepts that form the basis of acting of the poor do not always belong to either of these categories. They are not that they do possess and act upon concepts.


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An English daily once printed an amusing photograph of a common street scene in Calcutta. It showed a municipal sign proscribing urination with the order "Commit no nuisance," and a row of unconcerned citizens right underneath engaged in this odious form of civil disobedience. Even in such unreflecting moments, I shall argue, people are taking a philosophical stance, or at least a position with conceptual implications. And it is interesting to read the precise mapping of ideas involved in this commonplace of violations of civic rules. The photograph is hilarious and evocative not only because it shows an act of modest, or unintended, defiance but also because it shows a dissonance at many levels between two ways of dealing with and acting upon the world—of the poor and the rich, of the powerful and the dominated, of those who own property and those who can only define it, of legality and illegality, of obedience and passive evasion of rules. It shows in an everyday form the contest between a bourgeois order of the middle class and those who flout its rules. To anticipate my later argument, those who promulgated the notice had one conception of what public space meant, and those who defied it had another. In their appropriate contexts, both concepts made sense. There can be some interesting speculation about whether the defiant citizens knew English, since in the colonial order, ironically, such rules as were meant to be observed by all came in English, which was understood by very few.

The ubiquitous municipal notices in most large Indian cities are vestiges of the colonial administration. Their governing conventions were internalised by the Indian middle class, for whom control of everyday uses of space was an indisputable part of the establishment of their social sovereignty. Colonial rule introduced the conception of disciplining everyday conduct to give shape and form to the body politic. Rules were introduced to produce order and govern everyday behaviour. Sovereignty over society meant that social groups sharing the sovereigns' world had to be made to relate to the world according to the rules of elite imagination, not their own. As part of this social arrangement, it was necessary to obtain the obedience of the poor to a bourgeois conception of what it means for a space to be a modern city. The ideology of colonial modernity posited a duality between the city and country in which the city was seen as orderly, hygienic, scientific, technologically superior, and "civilised." As opposed to the loose disorder of the village, contact in

3. For the sake of simplicity in this essay I use a simple and possibly misleading dichotomy between the elite and the others. Simply, these others do not form a homogeneous body of people. But in Calcutta this practical distinction is quite well understood: the Absolute Middle Class on one side and on the other all others who live in the city to serve them. This covered various types of people, from the wealthy poor, servants, hucksters—salesmen, coolies, to artisans, craftsmen, vendors, and bazaar people, including shopkeepers, who were often fairly well-off.
the city was more standardised. To institute such regimentation of conduct, the colonial administration had to employ certain standardising techniques.

The municipal sign, a most important weapon in its war against spontaneous "indiscipline," was a colonial invention. It arrogated to itself, and its invisible enforcers, the function of a constant, relentless surveillance of everyday behaviour, a presence of unnerving invigilation over popular conduct. The police were a rather inadequate implement in enforcing such a civilising project with such minute attention to detail. What became crucial, through constant intervention, was the reinforcement of the conceptual distinction between the legal and the illegal, between the measuring tyranny of the shops on the streets and the chaos of vendors on the pavement. This task of policing was important precisely because it symbolised the presence of a distinctly Weberian rationalist intelligence acting through the agencies of the state, which constantly kept the rules, governed conduct, and imposed restrictions, without which the minimal precarious order of modern life threatened to dissolve into chaos. The standardizing function requires an appropriately standard external form. Street signs were given a standard visual styling. Painted in measured white letters on blue enamelled metal, they gradually became the emblem of the voice of the state. Prosigns promoting hygiene, traffic regulations, directions in huge disorderly railway stations, all were painted in the same standard colour and letter, a livery of municipal sovereignty. Until the 1960s most of these signs were in English, which marked the state's irresistible power and distance by delivering orders in language ordinary subjects could not entirely understand. Nonetheless, it was their obligation to obey the laws, and by a mixture of conjecture, experience, gossip, and improvisation, they managed usually to abide by these incomprehensible requisitions.

The Common and the Public

The modern idea of the public, especially the public-spheres, has been analysed in great depth and delicacy by a long line of European writers.4 Clearly, a version of

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4. The practice of begriffsnarziwic (translated by Kein-Titel as "notional semantics") can be done in ever-different ways, on the basis of texts (e.g., the work of Quentin Skinner and others) and its practice (which seems to be the somewhat more general conception implicit in the work of German historians of ideas like Reinhard Koselleck). I am indebted to Stuart Kunkel for helping me see this point clearly. See Quentin Skinner, "Language and Social Change," in James Tully, ed., Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and the Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 199-132; and Reinhard Koselleck, Futurity Past (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 86.
this idea of a public sphere was introduced into colonial India by the British administration and internalised by the modernist Indian elites. But did a similar concept exist in precolonial India, and, if it did, what was its context? Evidently, the idea of the public and public space have to be historically located first. In order to minimally function, all societies would need some notion of the common, and most would have some ideas about what a common space would be like—what it would look like, how it could be used, indeed, how it could be known that a particular space was common. The idea of the public is a particular configuration of commonness that emerged in the capitalist-democratic West in the course of the eighteenth century. It has some associations, particularly ones like universal access and öffentlichkeit (openness), which might not be expected to exist universally in ideas of common space.5

It appears that colonial elites in the modern Third World, like its people, suffer from early mortality.6 Calcutta is a city with a strangely short and tragic history. Unlike the Western cities Paris and London, which have a long and continuous history and which change hands from one class to another, Calcutta began as a city without a history. It was born with British colonialism and rose to a brief efflorescence when it was the capital of British India. After 1911, when the British, in order to placate the Moghuls, transferred the capital to Delhi, Calcutta began a headlong and unmitigated decline. The peculiar history of colonialism condemned it to crowding and neglect. The British were interested in only the centre of the original city, the central square with its large water tank, beside which they built a beautiful, ornate administration building named rather prosaically the Writers' Buildings. It stood next to the palatial residence of the viceroy, and the colonial officials and white businessmen lived in the areas immediately adjacent to it. At the heart of the city the British created the most

5. For discussions primarily centered on Europe, see Nigar Haberman, Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989), and Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992). Habermas’s work shows precisely how a specific configuration of the idea of the public emerged in the modern West. Pandemonium, the quality of there was periodically ignored, yet scholars striving to show the emergence of the idea of a “public space” in widely dissimilar cultures, is assumed to contribute to the great popularity of Habermas’s argument at the cost of a serious misunderstanding.

6. This can be narrated only above colonial cities like Bombay and Calcutta, which were built for colonial purposes. By contrast, there were various other types of cities, sacred cities like Varanasi, court cities like Delhi and Agra, or imperial cities like Vijayanagara, which had continuities historically over long periods.
nostalgic emblem of London, a large green open space called the maidan (which in Hindi and Bengali means simply open space) that had, against all historical odds, managed to resist the inexorable march of modern buildings. Around that great nostalgic space, which constantly reminded colonial inhabitants of what they had gained, but also what they had lost, in a constant plagiarisation of the European city, the British elite lived in passable imitation of Victorian material splendour. The boundary between the two cities, European and native, was clearly etched into the minds of the inhabitants, though there had to be a constant flow of people across it, since the relatively small British population needed the constant service of an enormous range of serving people to support their opulent lifestyle. Evidently the colonial administration also felt that the racial-colonial division must be given a materialised form, so Indians were legally barred from walking on the notorious Red Road. These prohibitions served to communicate the sense of a hierarchical space, a complex idea to express about a flat alluvial plain. But the ingenuity of these prohibitions, by their combination of strictness and capriciousness, managed to show the absolutist nature of colonial rule. These rules constantly reminded the natives that some barriers, otherwise trivial, could not be overslept. This understandably imbued the new Bengali intelligentsia, constantly fed with ideas of human equality and freedom in their college educations, with an irresistible lust to walk on those prohibited stretches of asphalt.

The European quarters of Calcutta were decorated with green spaces and gardens. These were public spaces but inextricably connected to restricted if not private use since the general atmosphere of racial segregation kept them relatively free of native inhabitants. Thus, colonial Calcutta was a strange admixture of ideas of public and private, of open and closed access, where these analytic distinctions were constantly invoked. But in practical conduct the distinctions got strangely intertwined. The structure of the city of Calcutta could be seen, in a stylised manner, as three concentric circles. At the centre were colonial offices and the European quarters with means to supply all European needs, consumer articles from Fortnum and Mason, ball nights, cricket clubs, and red light areas, a city within a city. Surrounding it on all sides were two other circles. The first, adjacent to it and in some ways imitating its opulent pretensions, was the Indian middle-class city, where large mansions were built by zamindar families as their Calcutta residences. From these the colonial authorities could be kept happy with constant, unremitting spectacles of loyal self-abasement while ordinary people were awed by displays of immense wealth. Outside and within the interstices of this middle-class city lived a city of emerging slums from where the ordinary people served, in their turn, these servants of the European elite.
Official and Unofficial Forms of the Common

Interestingly, however, Calcutta did not follow the logic of spatial segregation seen in some early modern European cities. The native parts of the city intermingled wealthy, middle, and poor neighbourhoods. But the middle class, as they acquired control of municipal power, clearly imitated the building style of their European masters. As the Indian city spread outward from the centre, the municipal corporation created new parks and open spaces. These were built with great deliberation, unlike open spaces in villages, which do not have clear boundaries and are left to user contingency. Open spaces not used for building houses or for cultivation would be used for communal group activities like children’s games, sites of a puja (worship) or a annual fair. But these would not be designated spaces, and they lacked the typical historical marks of modern administration of space. No formalised authority like a municipal government existed that could have the pretence of local sovereignty and legitimacy.

Second, these spaces did not have clear boundaries marked legally and officially, precisely because collective decision lacked the crucial modern quality of officiality. The idea of what is official needs to be investigated more carefully, as to its connotations—of a distinction between the person and the office he holds, the sense of a sanction of the state in some attenuated form behind its pronouncements, and the idea of irreversibility and canonicity of officially established rules. In colonial society, this decisiveness—the idea that the master was already incontrovertibly decided—and the shape and outcome of the decision was now non-negotiable—also had a connection with the strange sovereignty of the colonial ruler. Once a colonial administrator made a decision it was, however inconvenient and unreasonable, irreversible. Colonial subjects had to learn to live within these inconvenient rules, creating them like natural things, rather than try to open them up and contest their official content by rational argument or political dissent.

A third feature of this system was and is still that the obligations that attach to common activities are neither documental, nor written nor proclamation texts, nor constitutional. Yet it is quite clear that in Indian traditional society there are clearly understood notions of obligation and responsibility that are widely and punctiliously observed. To take a case intimately related to the problem of poverty, in most Indian cities, particularly in towns associated with religious pilgrimage, large populations of destitutes have assembled in search of a living, normally by begging. Beggars could be of many types, and their interminable kept them from being a solid group that could be treated with undivided contempt. There
would be destitute who had fallen into a state where they could not earn a living for themselves, through failing health, physical disability, diseases like leprosy) or some other form of ill luck. But these were not the only people engaged in begging. Begging was partially ennobled by the fact that some members of religious sects, *sadhu or vanaprastha*, also lived outside the standard practices of domesticity. These were individuals who placed themselves, in a delibereate religious choice, at the clarity and mercy of society. They could not, without transgressing their religious rules, live by any means except begging. Thus, the two types of begging, high and low, made the act of begging itself morally ambiguous. It was an activity of the most unfortunate in society, and also the most morally exalted. Householders consequently had a mixed moral attitude toward begging; they felt they earned moral virtue by showing compassion to those less fortunate than themselves and respect for those who were more morally worthy. But what is interesting from our point of view is the fact that it was considered the responsibility of the entire community of householder of a town to support this sometimes considerable population. This responsibility was not ordered by any single authority. It defined no clear allocation of burdens and responsibilities. It was clearly not contractual. Yet in hundreds of religious towns this kind of common system did actually work. Clearly it was not a "public" system of poorhouses as in the West, through it performed similar functions. Rather, we can argue that the idea or the concept of the public is only a historically specific configuration of the common. In Indian society there was a rich repertoire of concepts of common responsibility, obligation, action, that did not share the characteristic features of a bourgeois publicity like a recognisable source, proper authorization, impersonality, legality, state sanction, and clear ascription of individual responsibility, nor did it carry the no less crucial negative feature of being distinguished from the private.

The practical ways in which something could be seen as common, or done as common, could also vary greatly. A common prayer, an apparently unambiguous concept, could be practiced in several ways. When several Hindu devotees offer their prayers in the morning in the relative privacy of their separate houses, it is a common activity of a particular form. But it can also be a prayer that is offered by the same devotees standing in the waters of a river or the courtyard of a temple. They share a material-spatial context, but their acts are still, in terms of the nature of the agency, quite discrete. When they join in a common, collective

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8 The medieval religious text of the *Chittoprasastotra* is full of instances of housewives and nobility seeking the favour of giving along to Cittapura, a monastery.
Chanting, their emotion is made common in a more intense fashion. Finally, when they pull the rope of the chariot of Lord Jagannath, the act itself, of pulling the chariot and making it move in the wanted direction, could not be accomplished except by a collective act that fuses their distinct individual efforts. None of these acts would closely and unproblematically fit the idea of the public in the strictly bourgeois modern Western sense.

The Universal and the Appropriate

This can take us a step further into more complicated begriffsgeschichte. What is precisely missing in these traditional Indian cultural contexts is the notion of universality of access, the idea that an activity is open to all, irrespective of their social attributes. The entire practical pressure of the concept of the public in the Western context is to produce a tendency in the direction of universality, and when this universality is achieved, the privileged intellectual form in which access gets encoded is the semantology of individual rights. It has been argued plausibly that this individuality, which implies attributelessness, is logically linked to universality. This universality is formulated precisely in a language that assumes the existence of zero-degree individuals, reduced to the hypothetical points of their being, subject to the attributes they carry in actual life.

The arrangement of concepts in the Hindu social universe works in the reverse direction. Small cohesive units like the family, which uses a universally understood distinction between own/pari (own/others or self/not-self), designate spheres of restricted inclusivity. Some of these spheres, like the sphere of religious activities common to all Hindus, can be huge and contain millions of people, but I suspect they are still ruled by a traditional logic of strict nonuniversalism. Large numbers, even when they are massive, do not count for universality. They are still governed by the logic of segregation and a strict doctrine of appropriateness and title. Any function cannot be performed by anyone, as opposed to the strictly modern notion of substitutability of individuals performing a certain role. The function of performing a puja can be undertaken properly only by a Brahmin, just as the function of building a house can be performed by a carpenter, shaving by a barber—a doctrine of adhikari-vahedha, distinctions between appropriate agents of social functions. With this opposition between universality and appropriateness firmly in place, let us turn back to the public spaces of Calcutta.
The Place of the Parks in Social Space

I wish to show what happened to public spaces and associated social conceptions by the example of a park in different stages of its historical life. As structuralists would argue, the park signifies a particular thing only through its connection and relation to other spaces in a structured system. In European cities, parks are associated with recreation—from the gardens of the aristocracy to the modern parks open to all citizens for enjoyment and recreation. They are public precisely in the sense that they are open to everyone irrespective of status or income. The original conception of the municipal park came straight from a conception of town planning associated with a many-sided conception of fostering cultivation. Even if more extreme idealistic, romantic expectations once associated with the creation of public parks are discounted, parks are considered an indispensable part of decent, civilized, cultivated urban living. Parks not only beautified the city and preempted the always threatening possibility of an overcrowded concrete jungle; they fostered a balance between nature and culture, interpreted often in terms of a triumphalist rationalist conception.

Calcatta parks were generally large empty spaces, well laid out in regular geometric shapes, with perfectly laid paths, bordered by flower beds. These were reasonably well maintained by the public works departments of the municipality, with the flower arrangements tended by municipality-appointed gardeners. Middle-class inhabitants of the areas around them were treated to the everyday miracle of a carefully groomed milieu, cleanly swept and maintained at seemingly no expense. Parks were distinctively part of a world created out of wild nature, which persisted in the undeveloped countryside, by hortus design. They were also parts of a highly ordered and orderly world; the dichotomies between the gray of the concrete and the green of the park, between men, who lived in the city, and nature, which was imported to be enjoyed, between the privacy of the surrounding homes and the public quality of the park, were stated formally and understood quite well. This was represented in the activities for which the parks were used.

The Mixed Geography of the Inside and Outside

The most important theoretical distinction that ordered these conceptions was that between the public and private, which the middle-class elites had learned from the English. The Bengali middle-class home has been a theatre of serious conceptual conflicts since the start of British influence. The idea of a typically bour-
public culture
gloss domesticity), centered around the companionate marriage, which saw the marriage relationship as paradoxically both companionate and contractual, did not easily displace the traditional ideals of Bengali domesticity. This was an arena in which not merely the social but also the conceptual resources of Brahmanical Hindu society were rich and varied, and major thinkers of nineteenth-century Bengal deployed their considerable intellectual powers to defend and reinterpret the institution they correctly saw as the centre of traditional Indian society. Thus, the application of the standard Habermas thesis, which describes that which is external to the bourgeois family as a public sphere and conceives the concepts of privacy and publicity in a reciprocal fashion, yields a paradoxical negative result in this case. If the argument is that the public in the Western sense conceptually depends on a bourgeois definition of the private and that one cannot exist without the other, that they are not merely contrary but bound together in a contradiction, then this precisely makes it difficult to apply to the historical transformations in Bengal. There is a historical transformation of structures, but neither the central concepts nor their direction of transformation is the same as in the West. In this essay it is not possible to pursue this different transformation at length, only to indicate the significant points of difference with the European pattern. These concepts, it must be remembered, do not enter an empty, unmarked conceptual space. They have to affect the operation of established practices and their implicit conceptual structures. As a result of this historical context, eventually the Bengali society does something to these concepts, and to say they simply accept or reject them would be inaccurate. They improvise their response, and eventually this negotiation produces a peculiar configuration of the modern. I wish to suggest that this happened to the idea of privacy and of publicity, though my argument here is concerned only with the second.

The social group that was most strongly attracted to the European model of the public sphere was the middle-class educators' elite. They had the educational means to familiarize themselves with what happened in the West. They admired the great Enlightenment narrative of improvement and the right combination of a sense of inferiority to the British and cultural self-confidence to embark

9. It is not surprising that a long line of writers, including Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Subramania Bharati, devoted considerable time to interpreting the principles on which the French family was based.

10. Though we should not fall easily into believing that they took this narrative on faith, Bankimchandra's works are full of critical comments on this idea of progress, and one of his most celebrated pieces, "Deser Stridhan" (Improvement of the Country), deals directly with its application in India.
on a course of systematic emulation, which was indeed the essential and unmissable point of that story. Paradoxically, it was this urge to emulate that led to the first stirrings of nationalist hostility to the British, for colonial rule pursued a strangely contradictory policy. Its educational project engaged in a powerful effort to persuade elite Indians of the truth of a celebratory narrative of European modernity, of the birth and triumph of reason, which was, at least theoretically, considered universally accessible (if not implicitly inhuman). Yet when Bengalis sought to act out these principles, to imitate the British elite and enact a story of their own enlightenment, the British authorities obstructed that process with the racist argument of the intellectual and cultural inferiority of Indians, a stance which, if British attitudes were any indication, would prevail for quite a considerable time.

The Bengali elite deployed their traditional distinction with great effectiveness. It was immortalized by the title of Tagore's novel, Ghare Baire. This is translated into English as The Home and the World, which is narratively appropriate, since that indeed is the main point of conflict of the story. But from the point of view of serious begriffgeschichtliche this translation is misleading. The term ghare means, literally, inside the house; but the term baire means not the world literally, but the outside. Thus, it gestures beautifully toward the real problem of begriffgeschichtliche and development.11 Ghare Baire, a distinction closely linked to aparāt (or aparārātan in Hindi) (socialist-nice or self-righteous) in Bengali, is mapped over the distinction between the private and the public. Typically what happens is not that one of these dictionaries simply overwrites the other, erasing it from collective action or thinking. It is more complex and subtle. When enthusiastic supporters of the ideologies of the modern and the traditional declare their underlying hostility to the other side but are forced by historical circumstances to negotiate and modify what their own practical concepts mean to them, both ideologies are displaced and troubled by the proximity and subtle invasion of the other, and this leads often to configurations unquestioned and unremarked, for which there are no standard sociological names and which are consequently considered out of existence by the pressing vocabulary of Western sociology. In a strange inversion of the relation of reference, the vocabulary devised to describe the historical world of Europe is conflated with the ontology of all possible social worlds. Such historical resignifications of ideas and practices are wiped out conceptually rather than seriously registered.

11. I borrow this term from Anich discussions of the displacement or turning of the use of social space, putting something in a new different from the one for which it was originally meant.
The middle-class response to the Western idea of the public/private was thus one of partial emulation. Even the middle class did not readily accept the idea of the practice of companionsate marriage and the nuclear family. Any attempt by married couples to separate from their joint ancestral families was looked upon with disfavour, as a mark of excessive individualism and sheer selfishness. Yet at the same time the organisation of the family home, both architecturally and in terms of social practices, changed radically in the cities. Houses built for families created spaces for privacy of a collective kind, strictly enforced especially in the case of women in middle-class households. In fact, it is misleading to call this kind of secreting privacy, because it is not driven by a desire of the concerned individuals to be left alone. It was, at least for Bengali middle-class women, a precence for a paternalistic, supervised, materialy comfortable incarceration. But this itself accentuated the dichotomy between the ghare, the home-inside, and the baire, the street/world outside. To this way of looking at the world, the home was a realm of security, stable and patterned relationships that did not contain surprises. The outside, by contrast, was not a hospitable world. To the normal existences of people accustomed to living in caste society, which obviated the need to meet utter strangers and improvise responses to untried situations, the new kind of colonial city sparked fears of miscategorisation and unpredictability. The world outside was, on this view, inhospitable and full of danger of offence. At the same time, the English-educated middle class also responded quite positively to the prospects of self-making that the new world of the colonial city offered them, to the heady new freedom of moving out of destinies narrowly fixed by caste. They enjoyed the freedom to move from the older restrictive familial networks into friendships of their own choosing as well as to form political associations that pressed secular demands on the colonial state.

The outside as a concept became ambiguous. Though still threatening to the sensibilities of a segmented small-scale society, its promise was the large-scale operation of modernity, a world of freedom rather than restrictions. The middle-class city represented this new ideology spatially, where the outside was turned and governed by a civil order instead of the state of nature, which, on this view, reigned before the coming of British rule. And of all the spaces where the fruits of modern civilisation could be enjoyed, the most privileged was of course Calcutta, the first modern city. It is not surprising, therefore, that in this middle-class city the town layout showed the clear impress of the spatial dichotomy between the private houses and the public parks; they complemented each other to produce a colonial form of civic culture.
The Political Function of Public Space

There was an interesting feature in the planning of public spaces and the spatial semantics of the city. In European cities of emerging modernity, public spaces of various types came to play an important part in political life. With the onset of the Tocquevillian democratic process, spaces that were formerly kept for the exclusive use of the aristocracy and the royal courts became open to the ordinary public. Gardens were an important type of leisure space that gradually opened to public access. But absolutist monarchies of the time also built another kind of open space, sometimes on a grand scale. These were the public squares, partially required by the grand, unified designs of imperial or royal architecture, meant to express in material form the majesty of those new states, but partly also driven by the need for spaces for public spectacles, given the growing reciprocity between royalty and subjects.

European public spaces were originally meant for large gatherings, which assumed an asymmetry between rulers and their subjects. Rulers engaged in display and pomp, parading as active subjects in periodic spectacles. But these occasions by definition involved participating crowds, without whom spectacles would not be spectacles. European history saw the transformation of these spaces through the increasing mobilization of the urban poor. Although they were still used for spectacles of the state's authority and coercive power through military assemblies, marches, and religious ceremonies, popular forces gradually came to use them in their own ways. Public meetings and demonstrations used precisely these spaces in a gesture of gaining attention and inventing aristocratic authority. In the mythology of the French revolutions, these squares play a significant role. They are the scenes of dramatic retribution for the historic wrongs of the aristocracy. Tocqueville documents graphically in his recollections how in later revolutions the struggle for the control of Paris is partly also the conflict over its public spaces. A second, supplementary process by which a nationalistic history is inscribed on popular memory is by marking the streets with the names of the heroes of the nation and the heroes who fought in them. This meant that a step outside the house into the city streets was instantly step into the history of the French or the British nation. City space is thus strongly related to a narrativisation of collective nationalistic memory.12

12. Hobsbawm's account of the public sphere is where attention towards this aspect of the present. It tends to focus on the disruptive aspect of the idea of the public space, a certain neglect of its representational role.
The colonial city, unfortunately for its middle classes, was not built on similar lines. In colonial cities in India, there existed relatively few public arenas for the self-representation of the entire society. Understandably, a colonial power did not feel an urgent need to create such spaces. On the contrary, ceremonial display of its power and pageantry conventionally appropriated earlier Mughal representations like the darbar, since what it required was a one-sided exhibition of the state's might in front of a suitably awe audience of colonial subjects. With the growth of a pietopolitical public there arose the question of suitable spaces where public meetings could be conducted. Initially, these meetings were relatively small gatherings of notables who made petitions to the colonial authorities for various favours and requests about inconsequential matters of their self-interest. Such requests had a greater chance of being granted provided they were unattended by any hint of disaffection and sedition. Accordingly, meetings were held in precincts like libraries, temples, or town halls built specially for the conduct of assorted types of public gatherings. These occasions were extremely various and could range from condolence meetings on the death of great public figures to meetings of caste associations, to hesitant, fearful gatherings of early protest against colonial dispensations. With the coming of nationalist mass politics, this situation changed, and the meetings moved out to public squares and parks, both because of the size of the audience, which could not be accommodated in public halls, and also for the great symbolic effect of openness, the hint of defiance that an open public meeting carried.

By the end of the 1940s what was originally an astonishing and daring inversion of spatial symbolism had become so routine that people hardly observed its oddity. The large open space around the Ochterlony Monument, meant to be a great symbol of colonial remembrance and authority, was turned into the privileged site of popular public meetings by nationalist parties. Along with these huge public gatherings went a new culture of processions in which large numbers of people marched through main streets to the centre of the city to stage a public protest. In stable but significant ways this process altered their relation with the city and its spaces. As these numbers were greatly augmented by the inclusion of the very poor, they came to forge a different relationship to the city's streets, parks, and railway stations, through which the crowd flowed toward its ultimate destination on the maidan.

13. The classic discussion of this process is to be found in Bernard Cohn's essay "Representing Authority in Victorian India" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
The maidan also underwent a change of character. From being a large open space, a fixture of great beauty in the city’s official centre, and the relatively inaccessible place of recreation for the wealthy, it became a place owned by the ordinary people and the poor — admittedly, not always, or continuously, but occasionally. On days of a public meeting, often to mark some episode of defiance, a strike or demonstration, the maidan belonged to the poor. These places were interestingly seen as places of crowds, crowds constituting a sort of “social spectacles of invention, of the strange power of the vulnerable, the victimised, and the excluded.”

However, all classes in Bengali society did not evoke the same cumulative enthusiasm for Western forms. Groups that considered these forms of behaviour unmitigatedly inferior to their sedentary codes came from the two ends of the social spectrum: some deeply traditionalist Brahmans and upper-caste groups who obstinately refused Western education, and the poor, who were denied access by simple lack of financial means. British civilians writing discussing disease and hygiene often commented angrily about the peculiar sense of cleanliness of the Brahmins — an odd combination of fanatical attention to personal cleanliness with an astonishing indifference to filth in his surroundings. But in fact this was not hard to under-

14 From the point of view of the intelligentsia, the concept of a public meeting and its entry into the Bengali language is exceedingly interesting. From the late nineteenth century, the practice of having public meetings spread very quickly, and Bengalis became notoriously skilled in organizing them on the finest plans. It is also significant that organizing a public meeting by political parties was always, a two-sided affair. Normally leaders or spokesmen from middle classes would orchestrate these large demonstrations, but their success depended on the willingness of the poor to mobilize. They thus had to understand what a public meeting was about in a conceptual practical sense for it to happen. Yet the language failed to produce a comfortable phrase that would translate the English words. There was no basic problem with the world meeting; the Servant was usually performed that function. But the adjective goury has still not been domesticated. The most common recourse is to translate the English phrase public meeting into a Bengali sentence, very much like other political terms: convocation, conference, and party are good examples. It is quite possible to say: “Ake sade ruder pabla public meeting takho” (There will be a public meeting in our neighbourhood this evening). But when posters seek to express this in Bengali, without the use of English words, the difficulty remains unresolved. Most often they would use a phrase like hoi bhalobash chi, that is, a large or noteworthy gathering, and for full significance, this would usually be accompanied by the classical phrase “Dhale dhale jhulpat karin” (jump). Even at the largest protests, it is probably significant not the numerical but in its groups, not individual atoms of protestors, but rather a confluence of communities that this is perhaps an overstatement. There is no doubt on the main logical point: that the term public does not connote without some awkwardness. And whereas the Englishly defined translation, a person who would not understand the meaning of the term public, is unlikely to gather the meaning of the Bengali equivalent.
stand. The Brahminical concept of cleanliness and purity was quite different from the emergent Western ideas about hygiene. These are not successful and unsuccessful attempts to think about the problem of cleanliness, but two different mappings of concepts related to the material world, based in different cosmologies. In some ways this was also an illustration of the dichotomy between what was one's own and what was not (gharcharai).

The inside of a Brahmin house was often kept impressively clean including utensils and other household goods. Interiors of houses were swept and scrubbed with punctilious regularity. Indeed, there was an interesting connection between these duties and the religious markings on the times of day. The household’s internal space had to be cleaned at the hours of conjunction between light and darkness, at dawn and dusk, which coincided with time for worship (puja). The form of this puja, especially at nightfall, was to light the auspicious lamp, which had an Understood piety about it and was performed by women, who shared a strong connection with the symbolism of the interior. It would be considered odd, and family sacrilegious, to take the auspicious lamp into a room that had not been cleaned in preparation for this most ordinary form of thanksgiving. Thus, the cleaning chores were considered quasi-religious duties for household members (mostly women). Yet the garbage collected from this obsessive house-cleaning would be dumped on a mound right in front of the house. This owed not to a material-geographic but a conceptual distinction. When the garbage is dumped, it is not placed at a point where it cannot casually affect the realm of the household and its hygienic well-being. It is thrown over a conceptual boundary. The street was the outside, the space for which one did not have responsibility, or which was not one’s own, and it therefore lacked any association with obligation, because it did not symbolise any significant principle, did not express any values. It was merely a conceptually insignificant negative of the inside, which was prized and invested with aesthetic decoration. Thus, the outside—the streets, squares, bathing spots, and other facilities used by large numbers—were crowded, but they did not constitute a different kind of valued space, a civic space with norms and rules of use of its own, different from the domestic values of bourgeois privacy.  

In view of this, it is not surprising that traditional cities did not have a concep-

16. It is not merely the public that is problematic, but also the concept of the private. The private does not centre around the family, simply because the nuclear family is not the norm. The normal family unit is the large joint family, within which couples do not form a recognised unit to which privacy is granted. Households and units have to live “without privacy” in a much larger group, and the characteristic features of companionship relationship, intimacy and so on, do not apply.
ion of the civic in the European sense, since the cities performed very different historic functions. They were not distinguished conceptually and materially from the countryside. They had no corporate life of their own to shelter and encompass the lives of the private families living inside them, which corporate life was to be celebrated in the symbolism of the common space. They were not seen as a separate juridical “body social,” with which and about which things could be done, which could be in some cases a proper legal subject. In the modern European conceptualization of the public, there is an unmistakable strand of control, of order and discipline, which is altogether absent in the indigenous Indian one. Instead, there is a sense that the “outside” is not amenable to control—not by the individuals or the restricted resources of a small family, nor by any organized authority. The exterior is abandoned to an intrinsic disorderliness. No order, rules, restraints can be expected there.7

This conceptualization of outer space has also governed the everyday self-presentation of various classes. The middle classes would rarely go out of the house without relatively formal clothes, in the Bengali dhoti and patiala, though the seers of the summer weather sometimes undermined such societal conventions. But obviously, there was a hierarchy of public appearance strictly according to class, and as one went down the social hierarchy there was a greater willingness to mix and mingle the conceptions of public and private, of formal and internal dress. Even in market stalls, which were relatively lower middle class, bazaars, or traders, would work in their shops in formal wear, while poorer groups of vegetable or fish sellers would happily sell their wares in shorter and sweaty underclothes—an indulgence inconceivable to the office-going middle class. This again indicates not merely different behaviour because of monetary constraints but a different dress code based on different conceptual mapping of social space and other conventions of presentation of the self.

To return to the historical argument, then, what this shows is that there were two different codes for using social space, one mapping of inside/outside and another of public/private. Though these distinctions appear similar because they gesture toward the same elements of the material surroundings, if we look at them attentively it becomes clear that in the two cases the strict conceptual delineation and their practical consequences for behaviour are quite different.

7. It can be easily seen that the colonial administration does its best to ridicule the idea and strive to introduce a sense of order by foisting the rules associated with the modern state. This concern was behind its attempts at putting down various colonial practices, from the promiscuous and profligate behaviour by zamindars to the crumbling of old things.

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There is no easy, simple way of translating the inside/outside into the private/public. Due to historical contact, one mapping is superimposed onto the other, and that produces manifold displacements on both sides. There are also interesting mixtures and emergent forms that cannot be identified in terms of either logic; they are indigenous, irreducible forms of our modernity.

Uses of Park Space

It must be emphasized that I am pointing to a general process of plebiscitization, and this affects nearly all public space in Calcutta. Obviously, that is a context in which the elites, the lower classes, and the government, which is subject to volatile pressures of electoral democracy, are all significant players. The process of seeing that I have been describing happens "everywhere," but it might be useful to stick to a single case. Deshapriya Park, in South Calcutta, lying next to a major arterial road with tramways, can be used as an illustration of these historical trends. It was established in the second stage of creation of public space, by the Indian-controlled, already nationalist, municipality. Unlike the obligatory colonial names of the British city, parks in the Bengal area did not carry the names of English rulers or conquerors. This park shows the typical features of the second stage of city building. Its establishment was both tentative and rebellions. It was tentative in the sense that it sought to build up a popular memory in a way exactly similar to the colonial, and through that to the European practice, making names and events unforgettable by writing them into the spatial matrix.

18. Among the intellectual, of nineteenth-century Bengal who discussed with great relatability and penetration in this point were H kadar Mohanaditya in the Aaror Probashia (Essays on Religious Commerces and Divors in the Family and Outward Senses). Both argued that the ethos (which both equal with Hidalgo social system) was based fundamentally on family practices that partly owned, socially constructed, partly absorbed within its own largely flexible repertoire (e.g., businesses were managed by extended family networks rather than through impersonal structures of economic self-determination—a fact that is generally overlooked).

19. For instance, Esplanade, the name of the central public space in front of the Governor's House, the Dalhousie Square, the Eden Gardens, the Writers' Buildings. The fate of the nationalist crusade against these names is an interesting episode in this history. Until 1947, Eden Gardens (the venue of cricket matches, and Writers' Buildings remain unaltered. Dalhousie Square, renamed very recently after three nationalist martyrs, has resisted this situation successfully. Champagne Street, renamed by the colonial association, was changed to Laxmi Sarani in a fit of communal internationalism. It has sunk more successfully into obscurity but retains a dual existence. Its connoisseurs calling committees to their vehicles would still shout "Champagne!" And the fact that both nationalist and communist renaming of roads has been repeated seems to show that it has not to do with a division between the middle- and lower-class universes than with party politics in the usual sense.
people existed in, thus giving them the curious sense of something like constantly incanted religious proper names. But it was intuitive to more minute detail: for example, in material features locally copied the European parks. Grounds were fenced in by decorative wrought iron railings painted a ubiquitous green that became the colour of public things. All things the public property owned in public spaces—railing, benches, tree guards—were dubbed in that easily identifiable standardised paint, which marked every item as municipal property.

But the conception of Deshagbar Park was also rebellious in an undramatic way: it contained a marble bust of the nationalist leader after whom it was named. In a strange manner, it thus confirmed the efficacy of the distinction that nationalists advocated and colonial administrations implicitly acquiesced in—between an “internal” sphere of Bengali society and a proper province of the colonial state, a double-layered “public sphere.” In the internal public sphere of the Bengalis, they could in unimportant things do as they pleased. In the “outer” more universalistic one, which concerned everybody, nothing could be done without the explicit sanction or consultation of the colonial administration. So it became possible to name a park after a leader of Bengali society.

The physical layout of the park showed the deep imprint of the private/public binary. There was, obviously, a reciprocity, a relation of dependence between the public space of the park and the enclosed space of the houses facing it. There was an unstated ideal of urban architecture and living style that these houses fulfilled more than others that stood on streets but not directly on the open green space. Being set on the park increased the value of properties. But most important was the social cohesion between the public and private space in the area in general. For all its titular publicness, the park belonged in a sense to the middle-class community that surrounded it, and it was essentially involved in various functions of this social group.

In everyday terms, the park would be used for early morning exercises by middle-class males. In the hot summer days its trees would give shelter to the occasional passerby or rickshaw puller. But these lower-class men only did not see the park as belonging to them. They acted like intruders, there either on temporary business or for some occasional use, but without the right to remain there or to develop any proprietary sense. Before early evening, young children would come playing in the park, usually accompanied by their parents or aper-

20. However, this also shows the opposite site of religious naming: Although proper names were in most cases religious, before the 1930s, the fact that they were always religious made people forget their religious connotation. In some ways this is similar to the naming of public spaces. They are so ubiquitous as to become unnoticed.
visiting servants, but were compelled to retire to their houses, presumably for studies, before nightfall. In the evening, parks were the space where successful middle-class office-goers would take a stroll, sit for a while on the benches, and exchange greetings and gossip. In this respect, the middle-class publicity of the park violated the principle of universal access. Underneath the formal publicity was a subtle, unspoken hierarchy.

Frequently, parks were effectively extensions of the Bengali *pada* or residential neighbourhood, where families normally had stable, long-term residences and every household knew every other. Thus, the evening strolls were not completely anonymous. People formed stable groups that gathered every evening around the same benches or under the same trees. The social groups active in the park were not the more universalistic and occasional publics of "universal sociability." These spaces were characterised by sociability in which the relation between people was not the transient reciprocity of interests but more stable common purposes, temperaments, social bonding. People from lower echelons would be allowed ingress, but in strictly defined and restricted roles—as sellers of *sweets*, *malli* or municipal gardeners, or servants attending to young children. They were clearly suffered to mix in this crowd for the functionality of their roles for the "real" users of the space, not in their own right. The municipality, exclusively dominated by politicians from these elites until the 1960s, generally maintained them in exemplary cleanliness.

Apart from their daily use, the parks were also used for occasional purposes, but in those roles, too, they were clearly marked by the signs of the quasi-propertarian rights of the middle-class pada. On Sundays and holidays, local specimen played cricket on the green lawn of Deshupriya Park, and later a paved lawn tennis court was built on one side, as the middle-class taste in sports became more differentiated, tennis acquiring an aura as a specialty upper-middle-class recreation.21

Cricket was, too, the 1960s, a riddlely middle-class sport, requiring familiarity with countries of the former British empire; and accordingly, the crowds in Calcutta's cricket stadium were also primarily upper- and middle-class gatherings. In these games in south Calcutta most often even the conversion of white flannels was maintained. Both the indefinable culture around the game of cricket and the cost of the gear ensured that its players would remain solidly middle class.

The other occasional use of the parks was during religious festivals. As the

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21. Typically, a successful upper-class official in a colonial establishment would be expected to play or at least enjoy the game of cricket. After independence, and notice of the British style of upper-classness, a new generation of elites developed in which executives in business firms preferred *cricket* or, latterly, *golf.*
main open and beautified spaces of residential neighbourhoods, parks were
used for public religious ceremonies. These ceremonies were not individual
or family occasions but conducted for the entire community and paid for by all
families in the neighbourhood. They were given an interesting conceptual
appellation; these were called, in highly Sanskritised Bengali, surajmani dhar-
gotra, which comes closest to the idea of a public worship open to all. Sura
means "sun," jana means "people," put together, they evoked the idea of universal
access. This was to some extent an ingenious declaration, since, although every-
body was invited to file through the enclosure and take a look at the image, the
affair of the worship was a strictly neighbourhood and therefore sociably homo-
genous affair. Even gods in modern Calcutta are divided in strictly intelligible
class terms. The educated Bengali middle class worship Durga, the highly aethe-
ticised goddess of all power, a redemptive, avenging form of Shakti. Low-
class posters at the railway station, little mud-pullers on the city streets, and other
workers from the neighbouring rural state of Bihar worship Ramnun, the mon-
key servant of Lord Rama, and the lower-class dwellers of Calcutta's endless
slums worship appropriately lower forms of divine life like Shitala, the goddess
of smallpox, or Manasa, goddess of snakes. These deities are treated with appro-
priate contempt by members of the middle-class elite.

Partition and Refugee Influx

Since independence, the control of the middle-class elite over Calcutta's space
has declined in many ways and in clearly identifiable historical stages. A major
transformation occurred through the experience of the partition and its immedi-

22, Transformations of the Bengali-puja, shibori in a subject by our recently secularist social
scientist, is a major field that requires careful exploration. Generally, a major collective (public)
worship of the goddess Durga would be performed in every paha or neighbourhood, though there
would be a continuous series of season worship of various deities in the intensity of the house-
hold.

23. It is highly instructive to analyse the styles of making the images of the goddess Champa.
Traditional images of the goddess followed a highly refined code of representation; the face of
the goddess was not representational or realistically beautiful but symbolically enhanced. The
beauty of the goddess was not on the same scale in a mental vision and therefore could not be
portrayed in the same register, only signally. There has been a slowly foreward rejection of
this style in recent times, images being made increasingly in a naturalistic mode. This leads to
the one hand to a kind of individualisation of divine beauty, affording the artists more freedom of
individual composition, bodily forms and movements. Occasionally, people have speculated that
the divine images have been merged with the looks of individual film stars, or a strange but not
ununderstandable inversion of the logic of celebrity.

see consequences. Unprecedented numbers of people entered Calcutta after the partition in the hope of assistance from either the national government or, failing that, relatives. Poorer people deduced accurately that securing jobs would be easier in Calcutta. The influx of refugees from East Bengal was a trauma for the settled Bengali middle classes. Prejudice against East Bengalis was already common in the relatively affluent West Bengal even before waves of desperate people threatened inundation. The response of the Calcutta middle class was not very hospitable. Initially, the refugees settled anywhere open unoccupied space could be found, irrespective of titles or permission. Large numbers of refugees occupied garden houses, empty land, public parks, and railway platforms. Municipal efforts to resettle them were not very energetic and were partly hampered and undermined by widespread alleged corruption. Afterward, many refugees squatting on land they had been allowed originally to occupy temporarily, creating legally anomalous situations. The response of the government was to either eventually eject their occupation or simply look away. Although the initial flood of refugees was eventually cleared from the more privileged spaces of public use, like parks in middle-class neighbourhoods, the “refugee problem” created a precedent of a soiled conception of public space. A large proportion of refugees, the most indigent, utterly without recourse, built flimsy shacks along miles of railway line stretching out from Sealdah, the main suburban railway station in the middle of the city. Several miles of the space, which belonged to the railway and thus to a public authority, were turned into a vast permanent slum, which developed its usual network of relationships with neighbouring middle-class localities through work and crime.

Eventually it was this “logic,” established in a period of severe urban and state crisis, which stretched toward the middle-class parts of the city and altered the character of the parks and public space nearly everywhere. After all, this definition of the “public space” triumphs every night in Calcutta, as thousands of destitute sleep on the city streets—a private use of undoubtedly public spaces. For the poor, homeless, and other destitute people, “public” came to mean that which is not private, spaces from which they could not be excluded by somebody’s right

24. Not only upper-class but also lower-class speakers of Bengali would now often use the word public in a Bengali sentence without self-conscious awkwardness. However, the exact semantic force of the term in their usage would be somewhat displaced from the upper-class use, which would be more loyal to the English meaning. For the lower classes, this question of loyalty does not arise, since they do not understand the system of differentiation within which the term acquires its meaning in English. In their case, it acquires its semantic charge from an altogether different system of differentiations within Bengali.
to property. But this logic is also inextricably linked with the conventional idea of the bare. Possibly because there is no conception of the civic that bears a strong equation with the public, the idea of publicity in its altered Bengali version can most merely be empty, valueless negative of the private. It comprises assets that are owned by some generic institution like the government or the city municipality, which did not exercise fierce vigilance over its properties as individual owners did and that allowed, through default, indifference, and a strangely lax generosity, its owned things to be despoiled or used by people without other means. The public is a matter not of collective pride but of desperate ways that can range from free riding to vandalising. Undoubtedly, behind this there was also a downward sense of the responsibility of the state for its citizens: a curious mixture of paternalism, the obligation of the powerful to care for the destitute, and democracy, that it was after all the state's responsibility to provide minimal shelter to its citizens. Such a complex combination of attitudes established the right of the Calcutta citizen every right to the unrestricted hospitality of its pavements.

The refugee influx was not an isolated episode but a sign of the future. Not in such massive numbers, but with decline and increasing pressure on the village economies of West Bengal, a steady stream of the destitute flowed into Calcutta for the next few decades. Their numbers were too numerous to be absorbed even in Calcutta's capacious slums. They spilled over into improvised shanties in railway stations, then along the railway lines and into any conceivable place where people could find some shelter. People lived inside the huge unused sewer pipes that lay in Calcutta's streets for years awaiting civic work, turned by the mischievous ingenuity of the poor into unconventional forms of habitation.

The Pishaban Process

By the mid-1960s, the pressure on the city in such demographic terms was so immense that enterprising shopkeepers who could not afford rents in proper built-up shops constructed 'temporary' shacks along the pavements of main streets to vend their slightly cheaper wares. These shops sold less expensive commodities and saved greatly on overhead and labour costs, as most employed family labour. As the shops thrived, the areas began to lose their solidarity middle-class character. Single, large houses were often split up into several improvised flats, making their rents affordable to less affluent families. These, in turn, constituted a new group of consumers of less highly priced articles. Sometimes the goods sold in these stalls, known usually as 'hawkers' corners,' were not of inferior quality but
cheaper simply because of a more direct system of marketing, dispensing with intermediaries. The small shops gradually established themselves and were regarded, by a combination of economic pressures, as part of the neighbourhood. But they offended and struck a huge blow against the principles of the earlier initiative bourgeois configurations of public space. Roads around Deshupriya Park used to have wide pavements, too wide for the park’s good. Because of their width it was possible to build relatively small shacks right next to, and backing against, the beautiful ironwork railings. In a few years the park railings entirely disappeared from view, and the entire outside perimeter became an unbroken row of shops backing onto the park, hiding it completely from view from the tramway and from pedestrians walking on the main road. This development completely destroyed the architectural presupposition of the reciprocity between public and private space, between the houses and the green lawns. Instead, the park was enclosed and became a kind of peculiar interior space, invaded and suffused by the quasi-market. Given this development, although the parks did not become impossibly dirty, they steadily lost their justification for municipal beautification. The park no longer accomplished its designated visual spectacle. Initially, the middle classes still came for their strolls, but it grew clear that the enclosing signaled the start of a process of irreversible plebianisation. Other groups—shopkeepers who vended in the neighboring shacks, beggars, and others—now had greater and less intimidated access; and in a symbolic change of its status, the middle of the parks came to be used for disorderly games of football, a much more plebian sport compared to the stately mannersisms of the earlier cricketing culture.

As the pressures on the city grew more intense, the fortresses of the middle class started falling, and being divested of their generally aesthetic functions, the parks opened to the poor. The poor initially moved in with a certain measure of tentativeness. At first, increasingly large numbers of people began to sleep inside the park, thus dividing its day and its night between the upper and the lower classes of users. At night, like the streets, the park turned into a huge space for nightly shelter and sleep; but since most of these people plied jobs requiring an early start, by very early morning, before the middle-class day began, these spaces would be empty again, exactly like the streets, which reverted by morning from collective sleeping places to their normal status as pavements, probably because the sleepers themselves suffered from a vestigial sense that the roads had to be vacated and handed back for their normal function when day began.

Poor families began to build small shacks inside the park railings and settle there—the measure of permanence the life of destitutes in a city like Calcutta
allowed. The poor’s use of public space was bound to be very different, because of their straitened circumstances and because of the basic differences of their conceptual system. The plebisation of the park set in motion a very different use of its internal structure of objects—the trees, the statues, the railings, the paved paths. The poor improvised utterly different and often irreverent uses for all these things. The most striking difference was in their relation to the commemorative figures, statues, and busts of nationalist leaders. The idea of a nationalist conception of the civic that celebrated great lives in the cause of the nation by turning them into public art stands at a great and uneasy conceptual distance from the thinking of the destitute. They appreciated the physical stratum of the statue or the railings rather than their symbolic or aesthetic values.

Traffic also changed the park. Earlier the park space was used relatively lightly, by groups making only occasional visits; now, permanent settlement altered its character. Daily living meant that the park lost its daintiness and became distinctly more filthy. Washing lines would be set up across different parts, clothes draped around the marble shoulders of nationalist figures to dry. The grass died out under the constant treading and regular football games of slum children. Dirty water from the shacks drained into the parks, forming larger and larger puddles that after a point were beyond the capacity of even the most idealistic middle-class radicals to hurdle. Small piles of rubbish collected on corners, creating another intangible border of stench. The combination of changes eventually succeeded in driving away the middle-class users and turning the park into a collective property of the poor. The parks in many cases became slightly different types of urban slums, not the ideal milieu for constitutionals for middle-aged executives on summer evenings. Filth, and disorder, one might suspect, acted as a real barrier erected by the people inside, the new inhabitants of the Calcutta parks, to symbolically establish their control over that space. Since their tolerance of garbage was much greater than that of the upper-middle-class groups, the filth itself marked their making the park their own, a declaration to the middle classes of their unwelcomeness.

Thus, Calcutta parks passed into the fourth and present stage of their conceptual history. They now represent public space, but in a very different sense of the term.

25. Between the writing of this essay and its present printing the communist government of West Bengal underwent a massive drive to clear the roads of encroachments. The police and municipal authorities have destroyed shantytown shops built on the pavements, and some parts of Calcutta have been “cleaned up,” given back to its middle class. Some suspect that this was done to show international donor agencies and investors the resolve of the communist government to play by internationally acknowledged rules of modern capitalism.
Ironically, the English term *public* would be used in the discourse of this crucial denouement of space. If asked, the people would reply that they settled there precisely because this space was *public*, not owned by individual property owners, and as poor people they had a quasi-claim to settle in such state or municipal property. But the public had ceased to express any sense of the corporate personality of the city and civic pride. However violating this might be to the sensibilities and concepts of the middle class, this plebianisation of public space appears irreversible. I have argued elsewhere that the spread of democracy in India is read in many areas of life as a process of plebianisation, and in that sense, this decline of the public space and the increasing equator of squares and parks represents a consequence of democracy, which has given lower classes the confidence to invade these territories once entirely closed to them. The life of the parks, squares, streets is transformed. Just as, earlier, the middle classes would come there to exchange greetings and gossip, now the lower-class inhabitants similarly congregate in the evenings and exchange greetings and gossip in their own style. Only the context of conversation and their bodily postures are different. They often sit on their haunches, only in their dhutis, forming small circles to carry on conversations about the day behind. Since their life follows in some ways (but, significantly, not all) the more communal patterns of behaviour in the countryside they left behind, the poor of Howrah in effect turn the centre of the park into something like a village courtyard. In the more sordid circumstances of the city, they transfer the forms of rural informality. The decline of civil spaces in Calcutta thus forms stages in a strange begafhgeschichte, in which filth is not just a material thing but a conceptual entity, and the struggles about conservancy are a coded version of conceptual class struggle.

The Political Transcription of Poverty

From the late 1960s, politics in Calcutta came to be dominated by communist radicalism. But this did not alter the middle-class culture of politics in West Bengal. Left parties were led socially and intellectually by people of middle- or lower-middle-class origins who shared their culture with the higher social groups. Sometimes they prided themselves on a more sensitive rendition of common


27. The coming of modernity evidently alters the posture of the body. Sitting on one’s haunches is so firmly associated with peasant life that it is almost inconceivable to find any middle-class person in that posture. It is the mark of an ultimate violation of code, a fall from the graces of corporeal modernity.
bhakulok cultivation. The electoral support for these parties directly relied on the moralisation of the real urban poor. The lower-middle-class imagination of space would be convergent with the middle classes generally; they would see the space of the city through the mapping of public and private, and to them as well the public would have contained an irrevocable strain of the civil. They would not have shared the poor classes’ indifference or inability to appreciate the idea of the civil and would not have thought that the best use of a statue of a great nationalist leader was to hang washing on it. To the poor, the nation of which they were now an indispensable and sovereign part was a more distant and tedious imagination. Since this imagination is primarily created in schools, through the relentless repetitiveness of the curricular forms of historical memory, and the desitute are deprived of that essential constituent of citizenship, they find it difficult to participate in these highly emotive struggles over the past. They do not share the lower middle classes’ mode of living in history.

Thus, although the predominantly bhakulok leadership of India parties could successfully bring in their votes at the time of elections and could shape their large political initiatives, in the sphere of everyday life, which lacked a ceremonial role and would not qualify normally as a political realm, the really poor are left free to use the world as they please. No one would bother to inveigle them and supervise the way they put their washing out to dry, or in what manner they wash themselves at the municipal water taps. Thus, the life of the poor has two spheres, as it were—a sphere of their acts seen both by themselves and by others as being significant and political, and another filled with the teeming insignificance acts of their everyday existence. The political sections of the lower bhakulok, organised in

20. Bhakulok in Bengali society does not refer to a stratum-oriented social class belonging to it is more a matter of cultural prominence than income. Thus, the petty bourgeoisie formed the major part of this group, and in a sense they stamped their correctness and style on its culture.
21. Interestingly, communists first emerged as a strong urban force in electoral politics, gathering support among the workers and the poor in the cities, supplanted by the intellectual disaffection of the lower middle classes. However, since the elections of 1977, the continued control of the state government for nearly two decades, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has established a solid base of support in the countryside.
22. This is reflected in the enthusiasm of the early left-wing governments for changing street names. That could not be done without thinking of the city space in a matter of civic public and an object of Manetian consolidation, as opposed to nationalist history. There was often a streak of impatience in this reasoning. To cite a particular instance the street on which the American consulate was located was renamed Sri Chakravarty Sarani.
23. The Marxist group called the Naxalites, who were active in the city in the 1970s, showed they shared this conception of reterritorialisation by decreeing the status of nationalistic figures. It was a gesture of inversion, not indifference.

radical left-wing parties, would seek to shape, mould, and direct the activities in the first arena, but not the second. It is a characteristic feature of political life that subaltern groups would, by some ingenious move, turn these unavailing segments of their life activities into low levels of protest. Protest does not always assume the form of institutional defiance, which is a middle-class, educated prejudice created and reinforced by the reading of formal history. Those who do not have access to historical knowledge are less burdened by the weight of precedents and do not feel obliged to express their dislike of domination in the belated ways of the nineteenth-century European proletariat. They improvise and consequently express their social insubordination by causing everyday irritation to their social superiors, which evidently gives them the subtle pleasure of defilement. It is the site of the everyday, out of the surveillance of disciplines, that is usually turned into the place of small rebellions of the poor. But this is not the only way in which this small rebelliousness shows itself. Middle-class dwellers complain of other irritations, of the inescapable provocations of living in close proximity to poverty.

When the middle class was in uncontested control of noise in the city—that is, they made all the noise—the pujas in public parks often had a noisy side to the festivities. Loud noise, in any case, is an inseparable part of Hindu religious ceremonies. The worshipers under the huge tents or mandapam in which these ceremonies were held often played music over megaphones to create an atmosphere of the festive. Yet this noise was at the same time strictly ordered: the music was played at designated times, and these did not trespass into normal middle-class times for going to bed. By the time of supper for the Renuki bhadrakika households, the festive speakers would obediently fall silent. Those who ran these festivities and controlled them had internalized a strict delineation of time, a zoning system of the day's time for work, pleasure, recreation, and rest, and respected these rigorously.

With plebian control over the city's culture, noise control also underwent a discernible shift. Middle-class inhabitants have complained in more recent decades of "noise harassment" by the surrounding slums. The first reason remains the differentiation of duties, the class variation of worship. While the main autumn festival is still the worship of Durga, the brahminic goddess, and is still broadly

32. The sphere of activities needs to be taken seriously by social scientists. In this field the theoretical writings of Michel de Certeau have a lot to offer. Cf. Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life ( Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).
33. With greater security of space in the city of Calcutta, and the increasing availability of time material circumstances from the momentousness of the poor, the upper middle class has shown a distinct tendency to move leisurely up and away, by retreating into relatively still-hi-tech rooms.
dominated by the middle class, the slum-dwellers' adoration of the gods of the uneducated, like Shitala or Manasa, has become more restrained. In a sort of class struggle among gods, their celebration creates occasions for expression of reverence toward the middle class. This takes many forms: from blaring music throughout the night directed precisely at the middle-class houses, to inciting to extortionate mixing of subscriptions from middle-class families, which are barred by their education, taste, and culture from participating in these worship and may resent subsidising festivities in which they have no part. Because middle-class people would often complain about the unmentionably long periods for which these celebrations are continued, these would wrack out, unreasonably, for days on end. This suggests another interesting extension of the argument. The distinction between the concepts of the public and the private does not stand alone; it is evidently part of a grid of other distinctions central to the conceptual world of European modernity. It is related to the divisions and conventions of time: of work and leisure, labour and festivals.

The Culture of Poverty

These things point to a large historical trend. Indian Marxism has been astonishingly poor in its sociology of poverty, precisely because of its relentless economic relativism. Marxists have traditionally seen poverty as a lack, or absence, a failure to have income, as much as liberal economists have. They have never taken poverty seriously as a social practice, as a civilisation, and not surprisingly, they have not taken into account the intangible effects of dehumanisation on the culture of poverty in India. I have argued elsewhere that a most significant element in present-day Indian society is a politics of insubordination, not of revolutionary process. Insobordination shares its resentment and anger with revolutionary theory, but it lacks the education or the cultural preparation to produce an alternative imagination of the world, and remains satisfied with justifying the elite by leaving the world as it found it. Still, the solitary act is symbolic and in ways reminiscent of the violent act—it feels purifying. It purges the self of a sense of irremediable ignominy that sticks to existence itself. This is not the result of a deliberate attribution or an encounter with a middle-class individual who demonstrates overt contempt. Usually, a middle-class person remains well within her etiquette of restraint, and does not offer an occasion for offence. But the inequality built into everyday existence becomes a provocation for a kind of ritual that is not against an act but against a condition. The poor rarely have economic means to set against the middle class. What traditional Marxism does not
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understand is that although destitution divests them of any means of acting economically against their superior, the new imaginative allows them to turn seemingly insignificant things with no economic consequence or weight into their currency for repayment. By insulting a polite middle-aged man, a poor youngster does not lose his social position, but he does believe he increases his self-respect, thus setting up a subtle but well-understood exchange between economic and symbolic means. To the poor, therefore, the symbolic becomes a way of registering a protest against the stable condition of economic inequality. To look for an economic rationality behind this kind of act is futile, but to deny its political significance as an act is foolish. If insult was insignificant, it would not have recurrently insensibly in hundreds of Hindi films, which play a part in shaping the political imaginative of India’s urban poor. They dream not always of a turn in their economic fortune, but often about a symbolic revenge, an occasion for the gratuitous insult. The indirect gesture is a gesture of defiance against a kind of moral restraint that the middle-class code seeks to impose on them, and it gives to the poor, youth especially, the pleasure of insubordination and settlement.

Of course, much that is being said here is not new. These ideas form the staple of ordinary conversation about our experience of modernity. If we speak to others about the aggravations of living in modern Third World cities that change too fast for us to control our lives and our environment, these complaints constantly surface in the discussion. If this is so, if these form the substantial part of ordinary conversation about city life, if they constitute the primary level of common-sense interpretation of what people are going through, why do they not figure in social science discourse? This raises complicated questions of the relation between commonsense and scientific discourses about social reality. But one fundamental problem must be mentioned here in brief. My argument has been that the conceptual maps of modernity make an impact not on previously empty conceptual space but on a different conceptual mapping embedded in different practices of space. I have also tried to show that the acceptance of the new map is not passive. Both the middle classes in the case of their modification of the concept of the “private” and the poor in the case of the “patthik” (in fact, this is how the interlingual term should be written) improvise, selecting certain dimensions and fudging or rejecting others. But there is a fatal temptation in social science to entirely ignore this as a stable, practical conceptual map in its own right. It is much more common to assume, against all evidence, that these are intermediate and necessarily flawed points in a process of historical transition. People living in colonial or neocolonial modernity are simply not skilled enough to play the new practice game. Given time, incentive, training, goodwill, they would learn the
new universal practice of modernity. Modernity is invariably singular. I would like to suggest against this notion that the more modernity unfolds it seems to appear inexorably plural. Ordinary people do not make helpless transitions from one map to another. Transition narratives create the increasingly untenable illusion that given all the right conditions, Calcutta would turn into London, and the Bengali rich and poor would “understand” the principles of being private and public in the right ways. In fact, what these strong transition narratives do is blind us to the responsibility of looking at the shapes and forms our modernity is taking.

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